

The last word

Theory/criticism/reviewing/practice

by the Editors

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In our second editorial we quoted Eisenstein:

“American capitalism finds its sharpest and most expressive reflection in the American cinema.”

We then argued for a critical discussion of Hollywood films as part of our examination of all contemporary cinema. Now, after a year of writing, reading, editing, and discussing film reviews, with Eisenstein’s words in mind we would like to extend our argument for printing reviews in JUMP CUT. While we have fallen short of demonstrating the unity of theory, criticism, reviewing, and political practice, we still see it as our goal.

Strong traditions of pragmatism and empiricism in the United States have hindered the development of critical theory in the human sciences. In the area of film and media studies, these factors have been intensified by the fiercely maintained but nevertheless artificial isolation into nearly feudal craft guilds of those people concerned with different aspects of the media. While the strong anti-intellectualism in much film discussion can be seen as a healthy reaction against academic elitism, it is primarily reactionary, especially when voiced by leftists, because there is no such thing as “doing without theory.” Every human activity is based on some theory, and to refuse to recognize it is to refuse to face up to the values and implications of one’s own theory.

At the same time, we must grant that the prevailing tendencies of film theory in the United States offer little or nothing. The nascent U.S. effort to develop left cultural theory in the 1930s was cut off by WW2 and the postwar repression of the left. In the 1960s, primarily in Europe and in the third world—particularly in Latin America (Solanas, Getino, Rocha, Sanjinés, the Cubans)—new efforts to develop a Marxist theory of film

were begun. As part of our development of a political film criticism in the United States, we must go back to the lost U.S. heritage, to other prewar efforts in Germany and the Soviet Union, and understand the new theorists in Europe and Latin America. But, while we can import theory from other times and places, the task of developing film theory and criticism in this country must grow out of our own practice of film criticism and out of an analysis of our own culture and political situation.

Criticism is the practice of theory, the application of theory to text. Traditionally, it has several constituent parts: establishment of the text, study or explication, analysis, and evaluation. Because each of these parts, as practiced, is informed by theory, criticism is the test of theory against objects. But criticism is not only a matter of taking theory to specific cases; it is also the ground on which specific cases help us develop theory. Bazin's theory collapses before ANTONIO DAS MORTES, and Sarris doesn't know what to do with the Cuban cinema. Because these theories are based on a very limited view of what cinema is and can be, they are unable to deal with works which don't conform to that pre-formed view—they are, in the worst sense, dogmatic. In contrast to such limited and limiting theory and criticism, we believe Marxism provides an inclusive theory for the study of all films. But we also recognize that applying Marxist theory to cinema, and thereby developing a vigorous film criticism, remains a project before us. For this reason we stress constant work with contemporary films to continually develop our theory in practice.

Reviewing—the practical and immediate application of criticism—is not separate from criticism. Obviously, as reviewing is most widely carried on, it is an integral part of the commercial system of film distribution and consumption. Reviews serve as consumer guides, which, considering the current price of film tickets, is an important and useful function. And reviews often function as entertainment in their own right. For those who have seen a particular film, a review serves as a kind of discourse a way for the reader to test her/his own perceptions and reactions. Some reviewers even see themselves as improving the state of the art and the audience's taste.

These functions of reviews are neither good nor bad; JUMP CUT's reviews serve there, too. But we want to go one more step. We want our reviews to serve as a basis for developing theory and as a meeting place for all media people. Unfortunately, there is an intellectual and especially academic prejudice against anything so practical and evaluation-ridden as a review. On the other hand, filmmakers tend to dismiss reviewing as too intellectual and abstract. But reviews can be exactly the place where otherwise separate groups can meet and share ideas. It's in reviews that they can see their mutual interests—just as it is in political work that intellectuals and workers see their mutual

interests most clearly.

But we have found that many intellectuals as well as filmmakers are unwilling to write reviews of current films. We think they fear that putting their ideas about a current film in print, where anyone who has seen the film can read them and argue with them, will break down the mystery surrounding their particular craft—a mystery behind which they feel more comfortable. To deal with, to apply theory (conscious or not) to a film means that anyone who has read the review and seen the film becomes the critic's equal—something we think is very healthy. Thus we put great emphasis on reviews and favor ones in which the theory, the underlying assumptions of the reviewer, are expressed and tested on the film.

We see our intellectual work as taking place in the everyday world, as a totality with practical political work. Culture is an important part of the human experience. In a capitalist society, culture—particularly the media—is a weapon, a socializing force of the ruling class. Therefore, the struggle against this domination through analysis and education is an important task requiring both theory and practice,. We see JUMP CUT as an important part of this struggle. And we agree with Hans Magnus Enzensberger that

“any socialist strategy for the media must ... strive to end the isolation of the individual participants from the social learning and production process.”

Thus the film review is not only one important basis for developing film theory, it is also a nexus around which all media participants can gather. The film review serves to bring media people out of their isolation, to bring them into dialogue with one another—a dialogue out of which organization and struggle can grow.

JUMP CUT has, we think in our happier moments, an “agreeable diversity” which stands at the same time as an invitation, but which some see as a “disagreeable unevenness.” Sometimes we think that, too, but always in the context of JUMP CUT as an evolving practice and invitation. The tensions we feel between theory, criticism, reviewing, and political practice are inherent in our publication and are, also, creative tensions, We hope you think so too, and we invite your comments and participation.